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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3641

INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 001069

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA A/S WELCH FROM AMBASSADOR GODEC  
STATE ALSO FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/06/2017

TAGS: PGOV KDEM PREL KPAO TS

SUBJECT: MIXED TUNISIAN REACTION TO FREEDOM AGENDA  
ACTIVITIES

REF: A. TUNIS 1064

1B. TUNIS 985

1C. STATE 88465

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. As requested in Ref C and reported in Ref A, Post undertook a number of activities in June and July to promote the Freedom Agenda and draw attention to President Bush's Prague speech. While many in civil society expressed their appreciation for the USG's ongoing support for political reform in Tunisia, the GOT noted its concern with the Embassy's outreach. The Foreign Minister, however, also acknowledged for the first time that Tunisia needs further progress on human rights and democracy. Meanwhile, the periodic press attacks on those who engage foreign governments reappeared in late July. End Summary.

12. (C) While Post regularly engages opposition activists to promote the Freedom Agenda, these contacts welcomed the President's Prague speech as evidence of the USG's continued interest in promoting human rights and democracy in Tunisia. All of our interlocutors appreciated the opportunity to update the USG on their latest activities and challenges. They also welcomed our efforts to encourage freedom of expression and association in Tunisia and asked Post to continue its dialogue with the GOT on these subjects. In addition, several thanked the USG for its public statements in support of Tunisian civil society activists, which send a strong signal to the GOT and Tunisian public. However, they added that they were not willing to receive USG financial support (in the form of MEPI grants, for example) given their concerns about USG policies in the Middle East.

13. (S) During a July 6 meeting with MFA Chief of Staff Hatem Atallah, the Ambassador drew Atallah's attention to the President's Prague speech and noted, in the spirit of "no surprises," that he would be continuing outreach to opposition and civil society leaders. Atallah nervously inquired who the Ambassador planned to meet. Although the Ambassador did not specify, in a July 24 meeting (Ref B), Foreign Minister Abdallah noted Post's "repeated meetings" with members of "illegal," "Islamist" and "extremist" opposition activists. The Ambassador said Tunisia has an opportunity to make greater political progress and that the GOT should listen to the views of all Tunisians, including those in the opposition, as the Ambassador himself is doing. Abdallah told the Ambassador that he had learned that, "Inside the US embassy, Tunisia is the subject of virulent criticism by Tunisians." Abdallah added that he is "shocked" by Tunisians who insult their country in front of foreign governments. Yet, he admitted that "small problems" with

human rights and democracy exist, although GOT officials have different approaches, with some "open" and others "conservative" about political reform. During the month of July, the Ambassador met with a variety of officials on both ends of the spectrum and pressed them all to support greater political reform in Tunisia.

14. (C) GOT-loyal journalists took a similar stance against diplomatic engagement of civil society in several late July editorials denouncing independent activists who meet with foreign embassies as "traitors". A July 29 editorial in the Arabic daily ash-Shourouq reminded ambassadors to "stay at home," and not stick their noses in domestic affairs. Similarly, a July 31 editorial in the Ministry of Interior affiliate al-Hadath said "bankrupt individuals" who engage foreign governments "know nothing of Tunisians, and Tunisians know nothing of them." Both editorials suggested that superpowers who claim to be promoting democracy and human rights are simply engaging in hegemony.

15. (C) Comment: While Post -- and the opposition community -- are used to criticism from the GOT and the media, it is an unfortunate reminder that Tunisia is making only very slow progress on Freedom Agenda goals. While the activist community is not intimidated by the GOT, average Tunisians are quick to avoid political activities. Freedom of expression and association remain significant stumbling blocks to political reform in Tunisia, and there is little indication that the GOT intends to encourage public discourse on the country's challenges. Yet, the release of Mohammed Abbou and recent indications the GOT intends to resolve the Tunisian Human Rights League crisis suggest that the GOT may, at a minimum, be taking action to address the most public blemishes on its democratic facade. We continue our active engagement of GOT officials -- both the forward-leaning and

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the conservative -- to press for further Freedom Agenda progress. End Comment.

GODEC